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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 001390

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
OSD FOR A/S LONG
PM FOR A/S KIMMITT
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [UNSC](#) [IS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: SCENESETTER FOR OCTOBER 5-6 JOINT
MILITARY COMMISSION

Classified By: AMBASSADOR MICHELE J. SISON FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The expansion of the U.S.-Lebanese military partnership represents a historic opportunity to bolster the cause of democracy, peace and stability in Lebanon and the Middle East. The Government of Lebanon (GOL) has demonstrated a commitment to strengthening our military-to-military ties. The 2008 Joint Military Commission (JMC) meeting offers an opportunity to confirm the mutual benefits of the relationship and press for further engagement in key areas. Since the departure of Syrian forces in April of 2005, the USG has provided over \$410 million in training and equipment to the LAF. End Summary.

The INTERNAL POLITICAL SCENE

¶2. (C) There have been significant political developments since May 2008, when the government's decision to attempt to dismantle Hizballah's communications systems and remove the chief of airport security sparked armed clashes between Hizballah and Lebanese civilians. The clashes ended in a few days and led to the Qatari-brokered Doha Agreement of May 21 which ended the months-long political impasse and paved the way for the May 25 election of consensus candidate and former Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as President. After much wrangling between the majority and the opposition, Prime Minister Siniora completed formation of a national unity government on July 11, composed, per the Doha Agreement, of 16 majority ministers, 11 from the opposition, and three for President Sleiman (including the key Defense and Interior ministry portfolios). The Saad Hariri-led majority coalition and Hizballah-led opposition coalition have been uneasy partners in the new national unity government. Both coalitions are intently focused on parliamentary elections less than a year away. The Christian vote, divided between the two groups, will be decisive in determining who wins the next majority in the elections to be held in the April-June 2009 period. In the short term, two issues are likely to sharpen lines between the two groups: a new election law parliament should approve by mid-October, and the question of Hizballah's role and its arms in the national defense strategy.

13. (C) On August 28, a Lebanese Armed Forces helicopter operating in Hizballah-controlled territory in southern Lebanon was shot down, resulting in the death of an LAF officer. A young Hizballah fighter was arrested, and the military investigation is ongoing. Meanwhile, sporadic violence has plagued the northern city of Tripoli and surrounding areas, to include villages in the Northern Bekaa valley, although many are hopeful that a Hariri-brokered reconciliation agreement signed September 8 will prove a positive first step in overcoming a volatile political and security environment. On September 10, Druze politician Saleh Aridi was assassinated, sparking concerns over future actions by those elements opposed to Lebanon's national reconciliation. A clash in the north between rival Christian groups on September 17 resulted in two deaths.

14. (C) As called for in the Doha Agreement, President Sleiman announced on September 9 that he would launch a National Dialogue to discuss the national defense strategy, including the role of Hizballah's weapons. He chaired the first session on September 16 and the next is scheduled for November 5. Nonetheless, expectations in Lebanon are low that the Dialogue will actually lead to an agreement whereby Hizballah would give up its arms.

15. (C) During the summer of 2007, as Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), Michel Sleiman steadfastly led the LAF to victory against Fatah-al-Islam extremists at the Nahr al Barid Palestinian refugee camp. However, he is by nature a cautious man. He refrained from deploying the LAF

BEIRUT 00001390 002 OF 004

to counter Hizballah's May 2008 aggression, fearful of putting the army in the middle of a sectarian conflict and openly confronting Hizballah. Sleiman is trying to walk a fine line between pro-Syrian and pro-western forces.

16. (C) We must stress to the GOL that Hizballah must be disarmed. We should insist that the state of Lebanon must have a monopoly over the use of force and that more must be done to control arms smuggling from Syria. We should also focus on the positive relationship between the United States and Lebanon and U.S. support for the role of the Presidency. We believe that emphasizing the U.S. commitment to Lebanon is the best way to increase the GOL's confidence in the U.S. as a partner and consolidate support in Lebanon for the GOL. The GOL may also be concerned about the impact of U.S. elections on America's policy toward Lebanon, as well as the status of U.S.-French cooperation on Lebanon.

REGIONAL ISSUES

17. (C) Sleiman is in the U.S. September 23-26. He will address the UNGA and meet Secretary Rice in New York and travel to Washington DC to meet President Bush and Secretary Gates on September 25. He is likely to seek the President's views on the Middle East Peace Process. He argues that failure to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has fueled terrorism in the region, including Lebanon, where extremists use the Palestinian cause to justify their actions.

18. (C) The Government of Lebanon has urged that Israel withdraw from the disputed Sheba'a Farms territory and for Sheba'a to be placed under the authority of the United Nations. Government of Lebanon leadership may also urge the United States to put an end to Israeli overflights and to pressure the Israelis to turn over complete strike data to aid in demining efforts.

19. (C) President Sleiman recently traveled to Damascus and reached agreement with President Asad that Syria and Lebanon establish diplomatic relations between the two countries for the first time since Lebanon's independence 65 years ago. However, Asad yielded little in terms of demarcating the

common border (including Sheba'a Farms) or providing information on Lebanese citizens presumed missing in Syria. The latest report by the UN's Lebanon Independent Border Assessment Team, dated August 27, highlights the fact that Lebanon has made almost no progress in securing its border with Syria and points of entry as required by UNSCR 1701. The team noted that progress in fortifying Lebanon's border with Syria had been minimal. Sleiman and the government of Lebanon have had no official reaction yet.

U.S. MILITARY ASSISTANCE

¶10. (C) Since the departure of Syrian forces in April of 2005, the USG has provided over \$410 million in training and equipment to the LAF. The bulk of this aid has been Foreign Military Funding (FMF), but also include significant amounts of International Education and Training (IMET), Section 1206 funding, Counterterrorism Force Protection (CTFP), Joint Combined Exercises and Training (JCET), and various other military aid. FMF for FY 09 and FY 10 is tentatively scheduled at \$95M and \$100m respectively. The LAF five year acquisition plan is designed to take full advantage of these historic amounts of military aid.

U.S. GAINS FROM THE RELATIONSHIP: POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC

¶11. (C) The benefit the USG seeks from the strong military-to- military relationship with the LAF is to develop a valid alternative to Hizballah for the people of Lebanon to turn to for protection. A strong LAF also serves to counteract Iranian and Syrian influence in Lebanon.

BEIRUT 00001390 003 OF 004

AREAS FOR GREATER COOPERATION

¶12. (C) Interoperability: Currently there is an Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) between Lebanon and the U.S. which was used to great advantage by both countries in the Nahr al Bared fight in 2007. There is no Status of Forces agreement (SOFA) or Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) and no expectation the GOL would approve such agreements in the foreseeable future.

¶13. (C) Training: The key component of U.S. military training to the LAF will be the Comprehensive Training Program (CTP). Because of the regular security threats to official USG personnel in Lebanon, the life support of the CTP needs to be closely coordinated with the LAF, USCENCOM, and the U.S. Embassy. The robust JCET program needs to be maintained at its historic level of 6 missions per FY. Mobile Training Teams from ARCENT, MARCENT, AFCENT, NAVCENT and the USCG should also be programmed to assist the LAF.

¶14. (C) Modernization: After considerable U.S. urging, Lebanon has drafted a five year modernization plan. Getting Lebanon to ensure that its requests for Foreign Military funding (FMF) acquisitions are consistent with its plan will be key, and we should stress this in JMC discussions. We should also encourage the MOD to think more critically about whether they still need to retain their stock of aging and difficult-to-maintain Soviet equipment, particularly the T-54/55 tanks as well as the aging M-48 tanks.

WEAPONS RELEASE

¶15. (C) The MOD will continue to press, at a minimum, for release of some form of Close Air Support (CAS) with a precision weapons capability, Tactical UAVs, (RAVEN), TOW-2A missiles, Night Vision Equipment, and perhaps precision artillery munitions. The LAF is also in USCENCOM-led

discussions with the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) to transfer M-60 tanks to replace the aging Soviet T-55s and U.S. M-48 tanks. This transfer will require Third Party Transfer (TPT) authority from the USG.

The VALUE OF JMC DIALOGUE

¶16. (C) We expect the annual JMC to be a central component in our bilateral dialogue and gives us a valuable opportunity to explore mutual views on the state and direction of the relationship at a senior level. The JMC compliments the annual Security Assistance Review (SAR) that focuses on the action officer level of FMF cases.

ISSUES ON MINDEF MURR,S MIND

¶17. (C) In recent meetings, MINDEF Elias Murr has pressed strongly for a CAS Platform with precision capability as well as acquiring M60 tanks from Jordan. He would like to increase the size of the LAF, especially the Special Operating Forces, (SOF). MINDEF Murr and LAF CDR Kahwagi are planning a comprehensive officer changeover in the entire LAF in the very near future. Elias Murr was recently re-confirmed as the GOL Defense Minister in August, and Lieutenant General Jean Kahwagi was confirmed as the new LAF Commander in September. Staff Brigadier General Edmond Fadel was confirmed as the Director, Lebanese Armed Forces Intelligence Directorate, G2 in September.

¶18. (C) We recommend that the U.S. delegation to the JMC make the following points in the plenary session:

--Reiterate the strong and enduring U.S. commitment to an independent and sovereign Lebanon;

BEIRUT 00001390 004 OF 004

--Stress the constructive role that a peaceful and prosperous Lebanon can play in contributing to regional stability;

--Emphasize that the U.S. plans to continue to provide support to strengthen Lebanon's state institutions, including a robust package of U.S. military training and assistance, as well as assistance to the police (Internal Security Forces);

--Emphasize that continued USG support for the LAF, particularly in the U.S. Congress, is tied to perceptions that there is serious action being taken to Hizballah's use of force under GOL control;

--Note that in addition the U.S. will continue to assist the Government of Lebanon in building economic viability and building governance capacity.
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